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Cassandra Fernandes Faria

Aga Khan University, Institute for Educational Development, Karachi

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Food for Thought

Eating for the Baby & You

Pregnancy is a wonderful opportunity for a mother to take charge of her health. Knowing that she is nurturing not only herself but also the unborn, gives her the motivation to eat right, sleep well, exercise and abandon unhealthy habits. Healthy diet becomes very important because a pregnant woman's food choices influence her baby's weight, health, and overall development. While a complex interplay of genetics, environmental factors and maternal health contribute to pregnancy outcomes, the significance of proper nutrition for healthy pregnancies, healthy mothers and hence healthy babies cannot be ignored. Conversely, lack of key nutrients could lead to petite babies, incidence of birth defects in babies and even miscarriages. The idea of taking proper nutrition three months before conception is ideally advocated to prepare the mother's body adequately for the demands of pregnancy.

Pregnant women are recommended 300 extra calories a day. Mother-to-be should emphasize on improving the overall quality of the diet by selecting lean cuts of meat, choosing fresh fruit over canned fruits, and opting for whole grains instead of refined carbohydrates. In this way the calories consumed will be acquired in the form of proteins, complex carbohydrates and good fats which will benefit the baby and the mother instead of merely adding to the mother's weight, with all its concomitant ill effects on health.

A well balanced diet

A well balanced daily diet includes portions of protein from lean meat, fish, poultry, eggs, grains or beans for brain/tissue development, iron, servings of cooked and raw vegetables and fresh fruits for fibre, vitamins and minerals; grains such as rice, bread, pasta, and chapatti for energy; and dairy products such as milk, cheese and yogurt to provide for calcium and vitamins required by the body. Eating a variety of foods from each of the three important food groups – carbohydrates, fruits and vegetables, and protein – will help ensure that you and your baby get all the nutrients you need.

The best way a pregnant woman can receive all the protein, carbohydrates, fats, fiber, vitamins and minerals her body needs is to eat a variety of healthy foods and drink plenty

of fluids. Many doctors prescribe prenatal vitamin supplements as well, but these supplements are only meant to complement a well-balanced diet rather than substitute for one.

Special requirement

Pregnant women require extra folic acid, iron, calcium, and vitamin C while expecting.

Folic acid

Folic acid (also known as vitamin B9 or folate in its natural form) plays a crucial role in the healthy development of



the baby's nervous system. Not only is it essential for making red blood cells and for proper production, functioning and repair of DNA, it also serves to prevent neural tube defects in babies. Good sources of folic acids include grains, beans, spinach, okra, oranges, bananas, as well as fortified cereals.

Iron

Typically, the volume of blood in a pregnant woman's body goes up by almost 50 %, hence increasing the need for iron in its role as transporter of oxygen through the blood. Iron is also necessary for the baby's growth at later stages of the pregnancy. Good sources for iron include red meat, dark green vegetables such as spinach and broccoli, egg yolks, dried fruit, and apricots (meat and eggs should

always be well cooked). Iron is quite difficult for the body to absorb; to aid absorption, iron-rich food should be eaten with foods that are rich in Vitamin C, such as oranges, strawberries and peppers. Intake of tea or coffee is to be avoided within half an hour of eating an iron-rich meal as they reduce the amount of iron absorbed.

Vitamin Supplements

One should be cautious about taking supplements (other than a folic acid supplement) during pregnancy as large



doses of some vitamins could harm the mother and the baby. Eating a healthy diet is the best way to get the nutrients the mother needs. However, there are some supplements formulated for pregnant women. If the mother-to-be likes to take one, she must discuss with the doctor first.

Calcium

Calcium is a nutrient needed in the body to build strong teeth and bones (most of the calcium in the body is found in the bones). Calcium also allows blood to clot normally, muscles and nerves to function properly, and regulate the heart beat. Pregnant women require 1000 mg of calcium daily during pregnancy and while they breastfeed the



baby. If the mother fails to consume enough calcium to meet the need for proper development of the baby, the mother's body starts using its own reserves of calcium, hence decreasing bone mass of the mother. This puts the mother at risk for osteoporosis (brittle-bone disease) later in her life. Good sources of calcium include dairy products such as milk, yogurt and cheese as well as green leafy

vegetables and seafood (recommended to be used only in restricted quantities). Vitamin D helps in the absorption of calcium: the best source is sunlight, but it is also found in oily fish and margarine.

Foods to be cautious with

While the benefit of eating seafood (expressly fish) is always advocated, increasing contamination of seafood with mercury concentrations due to the dumping of industrial waste in the seas, poses a serious health hazard. The harmful effects extend even to babies in the uterus by disturbing brain and the nervous system development in the maturing fetus. The conventional wisdom in Pakistan is to opt for deep-sea fish and to avoid buying catches near the coast.

In addition, liver is traditionally considered a healthy and tasty delicacy in Pakistan – it is also one of the first 'health-boosting' foods offered by families to children and pregnant women due to the iron content that it offers. However, many doctors advise otherwise. The poultry-rearing



practices have resulted in poultry-liver contamination with antibiotics. Liver and other organ meats may have high concentrations of vitamin A, which should be avoided by pregnant women because excess vitamin A can hurt the baby. Being fat-soluble, vitamin A is stored to a variable degree in the body, making it more likely to cause toxicity when taken in excess amounts.

Caffeine – present in tea, coffee and many fizzy drinks – is best restricted to a minimum during pregnancy because of its effects on the baby. It inhibits the absorption of iron and calcium, disturbing the apt fetus development. Although green tea is extolled as a health drink, pregnant women should be aware that it contains both caffeine as well as tannic acid.

Finally, traditional attempts to produce desired attributes in babies often involve taking herbal remedies, increasing the consumption of certain items such as coconut water for colored eyes of the baby etc. Such practices should be avoided altogether since a baby's gender, eye color; skin tone etc. cannot be affected by consuming any particular food or medicine. The features of a baby are a result of genetic transcription that cannot be altered or affected by outside means. Following such a regimen can actually compromise the health and safety of the mother, as well as the child.

About the Writer:

Ms. Cassandra Fernandes Faria is currently working as an instructor and a team member of Citizenship Rights and Responsibilities Project (CRRP) Team at Aga Khan University - Institute for Educational Development. She writes on social issues for various publications.